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Chapter 5

Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

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# Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

Kathy Doncaster

## Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the two uses made of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) within Work Based Learning Studies programmes - as a programme planning mechanism and as a means of developing reflective thinking.

Brennan and Little (1996) point out that APEL is frequently an important element in the work based learning programmes which are now run by many universities. However, the use of APEL in relation to student *progression* at Middlesex University goes beyond its more traditional use as a means of simply *reviewing* previous learning for academic creditworthiness. This programme planning and progression-orientated use of APEL has been made possible by the University's academic framework. In view of this significance of APEL for progression rather than for review alone, we have removed 'prior' from the term, and APEL is now known as 'Recognition and Accreditation of Learning' (RAL) at Middlesex University.

With respect to the other use made of RAL - the development of reflective thinking - this is something that many universities are engaging with. As Brennan and Little (*ibid*) point out, many universities run courses on portfolio preparation, to support APEL facilities. This highlights the belief that the rethinking, transforming and synthesising of raw experience that portfolio preparation involves, is itself an indicator of academic ability. Middlesex University is no different, with guidance given to students on portfolio preparation which includes an explicit requirement for reflection on what it means to be a work based learner. However, what is unusual, is the way in which reflection is linked to progression in Middlesex University Work Based Learning Studies programmes. This will be explored more fully later.

Experiential learning, of which APEL - or RAL - is an aspect, is now an accepted part of adult learning theory. It has been written about extensively, particularly with regard to its value as a form of learning and how it can be facilitated, (for example, Kolb, 1984, and the many evaluations that have followed of the applicability of his experiential learning cycle to a range of educational settings). Critiques have also pointed out how enthusiasm for promoting experiential learning can also sometimes lead to misappropriations of it, (for example Boud and Walker, 1998, discuss how misconceptions about what it means to reflect on experiential learning can lead adult educators to use reflection in rule-bound and even unethical ways). Usher and Edwards (1994) have offered a

## **Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking**

critique from a larger cultural perspective, with a discussion of how the current value placed on experiential learning is an expression of postmodernity, of the replacement of universal knowledge and monolithic truths with local and self-referential ones, and of the reversal of the privileging of high culture in education with the valuation of learning developed through everyday life.

It is against the backdrop of this considerable interest in, and diverse valuations of, experiential learning, that the means whereby it is facilitated at Middlesex University is discussed in this chapter.

### **The development of RAL**

Middlesex has been developing its new approach to RAL since 1994. Before this, it was used mainly as a means for students to gain advanced standing on Middlesex University programmes, by showing that they could match the content of particular modules of study through previously certificated learning. The change in approach resulted from a fuller recognition that learning of higher education level could be achieved through experience in the workplace, (Garnett 1998). The first consequence of this change was that students were encouraged to make wide ranging claims for general credit, based on their workplace learning. The rationale was that students might have high level learning from work and other experience which could be captured within a claim for general credit - learning which might otherwise go unrecognised. However, the problem arose that such wide-ranging learning did not necessarily provide a close match with University courses. Consequently, it often could not be used on existing University programmes, though it did give students the opportunity to bench mark their own learning against higher education academic levels.

This was one of the important foundations for the development of Work Based Learning Studies as a subject area. Here, wide ranging claims for general credit could be used on programmes of study that students themselves customised around their own workplace learning and research. Once the possibility of undertaking a whole programme of work based study had been established, it was found that most students making RAL claims wished to go on to use the general credit so achieved on a Work Based Learning Studies programme.

It is now the case that students are encouraged to make a claim which is focused on the intended outcomes of their programme of work based study. This is quite different from the current situation in many universities, and the original situation at Middlesex University, where specific credit from prior learning is matched to particular courses. In Work Based Learning Studies, students are claiming general credit, from the broad range of their work and other experience, but focusing it towards a programme of study which they themselves customise in terms of work based content. So, for example, a person may gain general credit from an RAL claim in their work area of, say, marketing, and use this to underpin a work based project, on some aspect of their work in marketing.

### **RAL as an instrument for student progression**

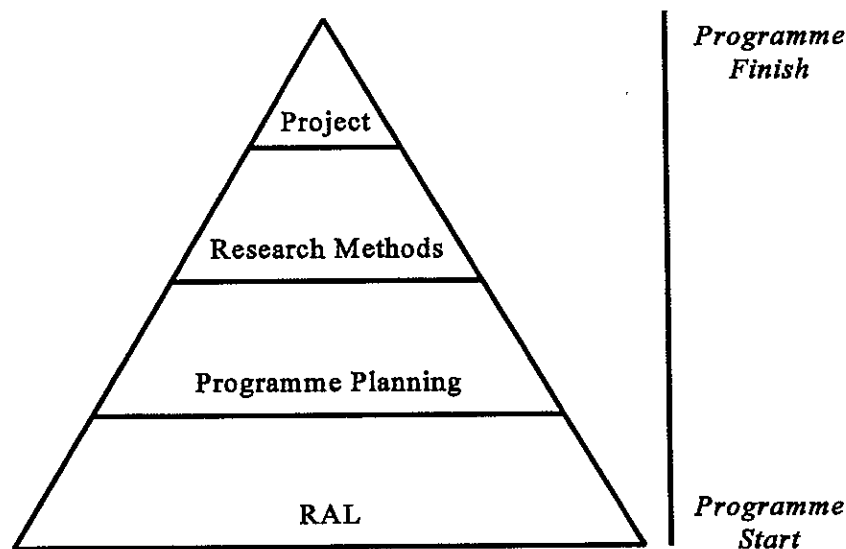
The opportunity that students have to make a focused claim for RAL, as described above, is what underpins the use of RAL as an instrument for student progression.

RAL can be taken as a stand alone module resulting in a certificate of credit. However, a great many students who make claims for RAL go on to put this credit towards a Work Based Learning

## Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

Studies award offered by Middlesex University. These range from Certificates to Masters degrees (and even a professional doctorate, see chapter 13). All are designed to enable students to become more effective work based learners, and they typically involve a number of key Work Based Learning Studies modules, offered at both under and post graduate levels. These are undertaken consecutively, as shown in Figure 5.1 below, and cumulatively build the student's knowledge, understanding and skills as a work based learner.

*Figure 5.1: RAL and subsequent core modules on a Work Based Learning Studies programme of study*



From Figure 5.1, it can be seen that RAL forms the foundation of a student's progression towards a university award, with a relatively broad based claim being made. The module involves the compilation of a portfolio presenting evidence of work based learning within 'areas of learning' defined by the student. The submission of a claim for RAL occurs within a module to acknowledge that the process of compiling a claim, of itself, involves learning - learning to critically reflect on past experience, to organise learning into discrete areas and to argue a case for why such learning is credit worthy.

If students choose to put credit received via RAL towards a university award, the modules they subsequently take are as follows. In the Programme Planning module, students work out and justify their programme of work based study, incorporating relevant learning successfully claimed through RAL (see chapter 6). This is followed by a Research Methods module, in which a proposal for a work based project is formulated and teaching given on relevant research methods (eg. action research) (see chapter 7). Finally, students undertake a work based Project - a piece of research undertaken in the workplace, and determined by the individual student's overall programme aims. In addition, taught courses from other University schools often form part of undergraduate programmes of work based study.

There are a number of reasons why making a RAL claim is of great value with respect to students' progression. Firstly, for those who start their Work Based Learning Studies programme of study with a clear sense of what the focus of their programme will be, making a focused RAL claim is

# Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

very useful, since it allows them to develop a highly customised programme from the outset. However, not all students know what work-related topics they want to focus on in their subsequent work based projects, at the point when they make their RAL claim. For these students, making an RAL claim has a strong element of self discovery. In this case, they are encouraged to make a claim that is representative of their workplace learning to date, even if it is not heavily focused on future goals. It is a mark of how the production of an RAL claim is itself a learning process, that the result of such an approach is typically a sense of growing directedness towards some specific area for a work based project. The acts of reflective analysis required in putting together an RAL claim tend to crystallise students' aims and objectives.

Secondly, Middlesex University regulations allow students to receive up to two thirds of the credit required for a University award through a RAL claim. Thus, they may be able to achieve an award more quickly than on a traditional taught programme because they do not have to repeat learning they already have. This is of particular benefit to mature students, who may already have acquired considerable expertise from many years of work. It enables experienced people to start their programme of academic study from where they currently are. Thirdly, RAL is offered from academic Levels 1 to 5. This means that students undertaking the full range of undergraduate and postgraduate University programmes can take advantage of it. Fourthly, RAL is an open access module. It can therefore provide a wide range of people with, not only access to the University, but a means of evaluating their own work based and experiential learning against university academic standards before embarking on a University programme. As a consequence, students are better able to assess whether or not to commit themselves to a programme of university study once they have completed a RAL claim. In this respect, RAL is also diagnostic. For example, students with many years of work experience who go through the RAL process may find that they gain credit at high enough levels for them to embark directly onto a postgraduate Work Based Learning Studies programme.

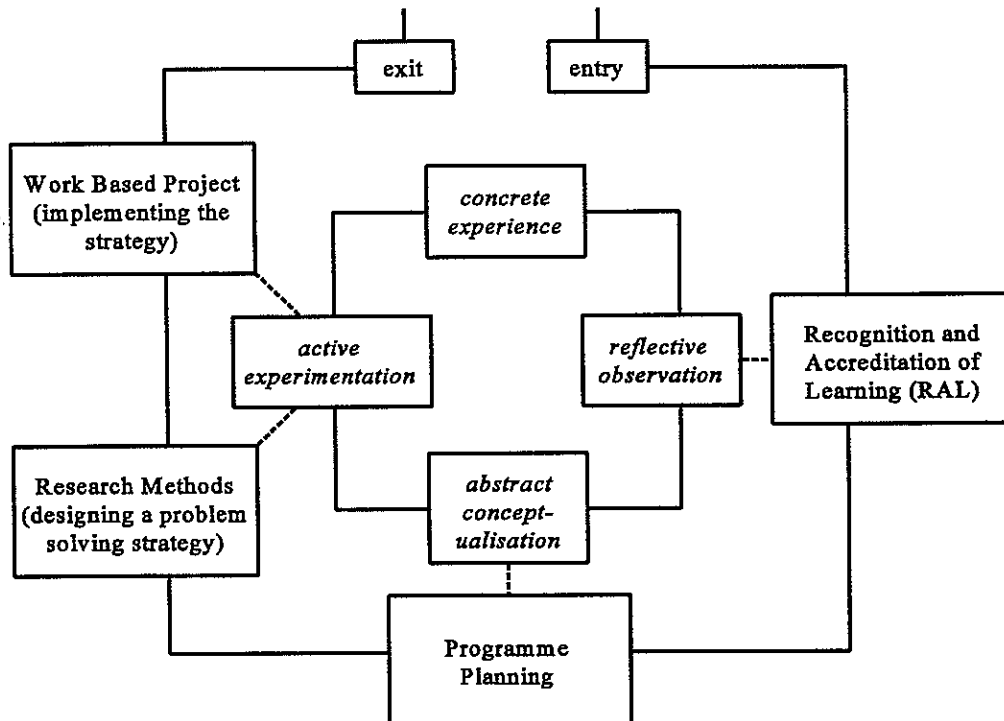
## RAL and reflective learning

Linked to the use of RAL as an instrument for student progression on Work Based Learning Studies programmes, as outlined above, is its use in the development of reflective thinking. As distinct from some uses of APEL, we do not characterise reflection simply as looking back, as a synonym for the reviewing of past learning. Instead, we focus on it as an element in the experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984), that is, on how it informs future learning.

Each of the core modules of Work Based Learning Studies programmes, described above, can be mapped onto one of the four elements of the experiential learning cycle, as shown in Figure 5.2 below.

## Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

Figure 5.2: Relationship of Kolb's Experiential learning cycle (1984) to Work Based Learning Studies core modules



Key:

Inner circle represents Kolb's experiential learning cycle

Outer circle represents Work Based Learning Studies core modules

Links between elements of Kolb's cycle and specific core modules shown by broken lines

From Figure 5.2 it can be seen that students produce a claim for RAL by reflecting on existing concrete experience. This involves reviewing learning already gained, but it is with a view to forward planning, to conceptualising, (in the Programme Planning module), the part it can play in the intended programme of study. The programme will conclude in a work based project, (a strategically planned and implemented problem solving intervention in the workplace), in which existing as well as new learning is drawn on.

A number of reflective skills are developed through the compilation of the RAL portfolio, which are then refined through further use in later modules on the programme. Firstly, students are asked to think about the experiential and work based learning they wish to claim credit for as 'areas of learning', that is, discrete fields or topics about which they have learning. Such a term is necessary, since students are generally making claims for general credit, rather than for specific credit matched against particular taught courses. Students must therefore themselves define the categories or groupings into which their learning falls. The teasing out, organising and grouping of experiential learning in this way is itself a learning process - students learn how to reflect on their experience, how to identify their own patterns of learning, and to make career planning decisions on the basis of this self knowledge, through the identification and description of these areas of learning. The detailed description of these areas of learning, and their support with evidence, enables assessment of the learning claimed to occur and the award of a quantity of academic credit at one or more

## Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

academic level. For example, an administrator, reflecting on his learning from work, may come to realise that he has some learning in the areas of 'financial management', 'people management' and 'resource management', all of which he can support with evidence (eg. reports, testimonials from colleagues and line manager, case studies of specific work projects undertaken).

Students are thus required to analyse their own work experience for the learning they have gained within it. The critical skills that this demands are likely to have already been developed to some extent, (perhaps very highly), through the students' engagement with their work. At the very least, this is a skill which students increase their ability to use, as a result of making a claim. Thus RAL is more than simply collating past learning. It requires the active deployment and/or development of critical reflective skills valued in the workplace.

Secondly, and in addition to the development of the ability to discriminate between aspects of learning, students also develop the ability to reflect holistically on their learning. This is a consequence of the role a RAL claim plays in students' development of a coherent programme of study. Both the initial and final modules of a Work Based Learning Studies programme, (the RAL claim and the project, respectively), draw their content from the specificity of students' own work. In developing a coherent programme of study, students must create the kind of pyramid depicted in Figure 5.1, connecting the broad base of existing learning to the specificity of the project topic. For example, a student's RAL credit may cluster around areas of learning in the field of 'managing a small business', because the student runs her own business. Her project should consequently be about some aspect of managing her business, not about her interest, say, in local history. A coherent programme plan is one which moves from the generally defined field apparent in the RAL 'areas of learning', to a focused, particular and in-depth project on some aspect of that field in the work based learning project module. A holistic reflection on existing learning in preparing a claim for RAL is an essential element in achieving this.

The third reflective skill that students develop in making a RAL claim is that of developing critical awareness through 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1987), that is actively considering aspects of work based practice retrospectively. The RAL portfolio is a *claim* for credit. Good portfolios are ones in which there are indications that students are arguing a case for why they deserve academic credit for learning achieved at work, not just describing learning that they possess. The idea of arguing a case is often an unfamiliar one to students. For many, making their RAL claim is their first contact with university academic standards. There is a tendency for them to feel that they must just rather passively offer up information about themselves, which will then be judged in terms of credit amount and level(s) by the University. The value of presenting RAL to students as 'arguing or making a case' is that it encourages a more active involvement in the process on their part - they become more self-reflective and self-evaluative about their own learning, and are thus able to group it more effectively into 'areas of learning'. These are valuable skills in an economic climate where learner managed learning and lifelong learning are becoming increasingly important. 'Arguing a case' encourages students to see that they have a responsible role to play in the accreditation process - that of representing their own learning in such a way as to maximise their own chances of receiving credit. This often builds self confidence and reduces both the fear and the actuality of failure.



# Recognising and Accrediting Learning and the Development of Reflective Thinking

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the use of RAL as an instrument for student progression and reflective thinking in Work Based Learning Studies programmes. The shift from conceptualising RAL as simply a review of 'prior' learning has come about partly because of the number of students making a claim for RAL who are doing so for forward-looking, career-oriented reasons. This, in turn, is linked to the fact that a large proportion of RAL students wish to use it as a first stage in obtaining a Work Based Learning Studies award. It has thus become important for those who tutor RAL students to show them how their claim may assist them in reaching their future goals, rather than to simply present it as essentially a self-contained and review-orientated process.

This characteristic of RAL as a bridge between existing learning and future learning goals gives it great potential in a lifelong learning context. The *process* of making a claim demands that students utilise skills of critical evaluation and reflection. This frequently has a confirmatory not just a developmental aspect - students often bring with them skills in evaluation and planning from their work experience. The process of making a claim for RAL further develops these skills, which students can then take back out into the workplace in a more refined form. In addition, the *product* of a claim provides students with a clear statement about their learning to date and provides direction for future professional and/or academic development.

